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Oscar Wilde in Outline

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One fiery-coloured moment of great life!
And then—how barren the nations' praise!
How vain the trump of Glory! Bitter thorns
Were in that laurel leaf, whose toothed barbs
Burned and bit deep till fire and red flame
Seemed to feed full upon my brain, and make
The garden a bare desert.
With wild hands
I strove to tear it from my bleeding brow,
But all in vain; and with a dolorous cry
That paled the lingering stars before their time,
I waked at last, and saw the timorous dawn
Peer with grey face into my darkened room,
And would have deemed it a mere idle dream
But for this restless pain that gnaws my heart,
And the red wounds of thorns upon my brow.
—*Translation from the Polish of Madame Modjeska by Oscar Wilde.*

THE TRUE KNOWLEDGE

Thou knowest all; I seek in vain
  What lands to till or sow with seed—
  The land is black with briar and weed,
Nor cares for falling tears or rain.

Thou knowest all; I sit and wait
  With blinded eyes and hands that fail,
  Till the last lifting of the veil
And the first opening of the gate.

Thou knowest all; I cannot see.
  I trust I shall not live in vain,
  I know that we shall meet again
In some divine eternity.

Men in general often find it hard to dissociate the work of artists from the circumstances of their lives. Let a company fall to talking of Villon, and it is a safe bet that before long someone will drag in the incident of his having wandered very close to the gallows. Talk of Baudelaire, and we are prone to forget, for a moment, his *Flowers of Evil*, to recall that he painted his hair green. Of Dowson, we remember that he was a pot house drunkard and overlook his *Impenitentia Ultima*. Sometimes it seems, indeed, as though more truth was in the saying that the evil that men do lives after them and the good is often interr'd with their bones, than the reverse. Certainly Oscar Wilde's place in literature would have been decided long ago but for the distortion caused by circumstances in his life. But, as the mists clear, certain points stand out. It seems very definitely decided that as a poet he flew on wings too feeble to reach the clear, cold heights of Parnasus, two poems only being marked for distinction. *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* and *The Sphinx*. As a writer of fiction he will probably be forgotten, or at best, remembered by one book, as is Charles

Brockden Brown, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* living as a literary curiosity as *Wieland* lives, or as Beckford's *Vathek* lives, a thing at once odd and curious. As literary critic Wilde cannot rank with Hazlitt or Sainte-Beuve. As dramatist, doubtless, his fame is secure, and as essayist he will not be forgotten.

His friend, M. Andre Gide, has told us that Wilde said his novels and stories were written as the result of wagers made. That is hard to believe. Too plainly both novels and stories bear the earmarks of Wilde the stylist. His novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, approaches too nearly his expressed ideal, his desire to write a tale that should be of the wondrous beauty of a Persian rug. If Wilde wrote either novel or story on a wager, he must have wagered with himself. For Oscar Wilde took himself far too seriously to hang his art on a hair, to stake his literary reputation on the casting of a die. Indeed, he took himself and his art more seriously than he took the world, and that to his own undoing.

In another place I have shown how Wilde was influenced, how his life's path was pulled out of its calculated orbit because of his fem-

inine soul, and how heredity swayed his acts. Of that last he was well aware, has, indeed, confessed to the world more than once and especially in a passage in *The Critic as Artist*:

> Heredity has become, as it were, the warrant for the contemplative life. It has shown us that we are never less free than when we try to act. It has hemmed us round with the nets of the hunter, and written upon the wall the prophecy of our doom. We may not watch it, for it is within us. We may not see it, save in a mirror that mirrors the soul. It is Nemesis without her mask. It is the last of the Fates, and the most terrible. It is the ONLY one of the Gods whose real name we know.

The feminine soul naturally had its influence, gave his literary work a tendency, a direction. To say that it did so seems so obvious as almost to be platitudinous. With that feminine soul he could never have written a *Call of the Wild*, for instance, nor could he have written a *Walden*, because he was physically and mentally incapable of living a life of adventure as Jack London lived, or of scaling life down to the bare bone as Thoreau did. The fact is that Wilde himself was a contradiction, this giant of a man with the feminine soul was the sport of the gods, and that the spirit of contradiction entered into his writ-

ings is everywhere apparent in the written page.

Another thing the feminine soul did for him. Because of that inner urge, he was filled with a burning desire to be admired, and therefore wrote much for the pyrotechnical effect. In a word, he loved to show off, to say and write things calculated to startle. You have exactly the same spirit manifest in Chesterton, in Belloc, too, but to lesser degree. But in Wilde, that self-satisfied strutting, that peacock exhibition of brilliant parts is very obvious, indeed.

Added to the spirit of contradiction and the pavonic display, there was, in Wilde, a strong spirit of partizanship. That accounts for his proclamation of himself as a kind of John the Baptist for Charles Baudelaire. Indeed, for a time, the Baudelairean influence colored all that he wrote and he outdid his master in ornateness. The same spirit of partizanship led him to out-Pater Pater. He conceived it to be a worthy mission to acquaint the stolid British public with Platonic teachings, especially as relating tō affection between men. That, of course, was as impossible a

task and as hopeless as it would be to attempt to grow banana trees in Greenland. However, Wilde worked valiantly in his cause and, because of ignorance, and some wilful distortion and misrepresentation, much that he wrote in all sincerity later in his life plagued him.

As final ingredients there may be cited his opposition to the commercialism and the philistinism of his day which he shared in company with John Ruskin and Matthew Arnold, and his real desire to cultivate the capacity for refined enjoyment of the beautiful in art and literature, an outcropping of his partizanship of Walter Pater.

THE SPIRIT OF CONTRADICTION

In some respects Wilde was like a clever debater who takes keen delight in flouting the opposition. He was of that sort who, privately granting the conclusions of his opponent, will deliberately beat about the bush in an effort to discover entirely new reasons, spiritedly rejecting all those advanced by the other side. Chesterton is of the same stripe. To such men to be destructive, to dazzle, to

astourd, is meat and drink. Of all pleasures, there is none to interest them as does the game of conversational entanglements. At whatever cost, they must score off of the opposition, be that opposition an individual, the public, custom or convention. Nor do they come unscathed from the battle, for prejudices and widely held beliefs are very solid things to butt against. Not with entire impunity may anyone attack what men have imbibed with their mother's milk. Conventions and customs are results of ages of experience and to modify them with changing circumstances is, at the best, a slow task.

By way of instance of the argument contradictory and provoking, let us take a passage from *The Importance of Being Earnest.* It runs: "The modern sympathy with invalids is morbid. Illness of any kind is hardly a thing to be encouraged in others." Reading that, your average man who belongs to a fraternal order, who subscribes to charity funds, who rushes to fountain pen when a begging list is thrust before him, is shocked. "What!" he exclaims, "would this fellow abolish sympathy? would he weaken personal

love and human affection? Does he scorn the little child whose mother clung to it until it sunk into its grave? My dear, old mother who——" and so on. There would be sentimentalities, and, at the end, Wilde would stand condemned as a cold callous anti-Christ.

But without trying to read anything into what Wilde has written except that which was actually there, reading carefully and accepting it as the result of his own thought and experience, we find much of value. We remember that Wilde had pondered long on hereditary influences, was fully aware that he came from a failing stock and inherited fatal weaknesses. He had also said something anent the stupidity of holding that marriage was an institution determined by an omniscient divinity and if anything was made in heaven it was divorce, not marriage. Putting these together we have, not a cold and callous piece of impudence, but an idea which, if pondered, we find leads to the belief that society would do well to regard as an offense against itself the mating of undesirables from whom might spring unhealthy branches, or those prone to weaknesses or disease. Approached

from another direction the teaching looks sound enough and we embrace it, calling it the gospel of Eugenics. Certainly, a couple having married and finding in the course of time that their union was unfavorable, unpromising as to their mutual happiness, would, most certainly, do well to separate, for of all creatures, who so unhappy as children of a joyless union? Hence Wilde's "Divorces are made in heaven." Hence, also, his scornful contempt for those who spend efforts on the result of those social ills which we see in the sick. After all, it is not vastly removed from Christ's swift answer to the sentimentalist: "Let the dead bury the dead." The Wilde idea closely touches Nietzsche's. There is little time to waste on failures. Man is in a state of transition and must be surpassed. The human race has a long march before it. Which leads to another apparently contradictory statement, another solid truth: "Discontent is the first step in the progress of a man or a nation." Of course it is, although shallow or thoughtless people denounced Wilde as a stirrer up of trouble when the saying was quoted by socialists and organizers of the unemployed. Had Wilde

said, "It is the duty of every Englishman to be progressive," the platitude would have been hailed with delight, and he might have basked in the concentrated smiles of the black-coated million. But he chose the argument contradictory and shocked with a truth. The unthinking saw in the saying, not a very ordinary remark, but a gospel of discontent calculated to make men vicious and improvident, anarchical and cruel.

Take another instance of the argument contradictory, one from his essay, *The Decay of the Art of Lying*, which enraged many on this side of the Atlantic. Here it is:

> The crude commercialism of America, its materializing spirit, its indifference to the poetical side of things, and its lack of imagination and of high unattainable ideals, are entirely due to that country having adopted for its national hero a man, who according to his own confession, was incapable of telling a lie, and it is not too much to say that the story of George Washington and the cherry-tree has done more harm, and in a shorter space of time, than any other moral tale in the whole of literature.

The book of collected essays, be it said, is called *Intentions*. Now Wilde's intention in the passage quoted, in the entire essay in fact, was to register a condemnation of the idiotic

habit of pestiferous puritans in forever trying to tack a "moral lesson" to a work of art. And the desire to do that is distinctly an American vice. Not more than two weeks ago I came across an instance in which a school teacher had set his pupil the task of writing an essay with this as subject: "What moral lesson do we get from Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island?*" Now it must be clear to any thinking man that Stevenson had no more idea of trying to convey a moral lesson in that glorious tale than he had of advocating murder and piracy. Healthy minds read for pleasure and not for moral profit, and no sane boy rushes out to murder his grandmother because he has read the life of Nero. But our moralists are forever trying to turn the world into a loveless place, a hell in which each and every one is expected to be forever in a state of awful spiritual anguish, imagining themselves to be reprobate, shaken with religious doubt. The dark and cruel fanaticism of the uplifter would rob both youth and man of joy, and the world would be, had the moral-lesson monger his way, a duller, blanker, grayer place every day. The uplifter

would fasten upon us a blighting, spiritual tyranny. On young America, then, the meddlers made an early start. Washington, the national hero, must be portrayed first and foremost as inhuman, a something not of the world in which all men are liars. But at bottom, Wilde was driving home the salutory lesson that art is, must be, independent of morality: must, assuredly, follow its destiny quite independent of moral purpose.

From quite another point of view, from a common sense point of view, we may come to a realization of the folly of painting our national heroes as monsters of virtue—as Charles Grandisons, all correct and precise, and finicking. To endow our Lincolns and Washingtons with middle class respectability is to belittle them. The picture of them is unconvincing, as the picture of men without faults always is. Your sensible European knows better than to set up a moral scarecrow with all bad spots painted out, and loves his Nelson none the less because of the Lady Hamilton affair, approves of his Dickens while admitting he loved his glass, had a golden opinion of the late King Edward, although he had his *affaires*.

"The crude commercialism of America," that Wilde denounced time and time again, seems to be something that we are only now coming to realize. Thoreau denounced it, of course; also did Emerson, but theirs were voices in the wilderness. Today the cry is being taken up everywhere. Upton Sinclair, Sinclair Lewis, John Hall Wheelock and a dozen others are calling upon men to see something more than the mere piling up of dollars in life. It is being realized that we are, as a nation, sadly under-educated, that we have overlooked something of the highest import when we have overlooked real self-culture. Wilde's words, once considered odd, now no longer have the appearance of oddity.

The development of the race depends on the development of the individual, and where self-culture has ceased to be the ideal, the intellectual standard is instantly lowered, and, often, ultimately lost. If you meet at dinner a man who has spent his life in educating himself—a rare type in our time, I admit, but still one occasionally to be met with—you rise from table richer, and conscious that a high ideal has for a moment touched and sanctified your days.

And in another place in the same essay, *The Critic as Artist*:

Who that moves in the stress and turmoil of

actual existence, noisy politician, or brawling social reformer, or poor narrow-minded priest blinded by the sufferings of that unimportant section of the community among whom he cast his lot, can seriously claim to be able to form a disinterested intellectual judgment about any one thing? Each of the professions means a prejudice. The necessity for a career forces every one to take sides. We live in the age of the overworked, and the under-educated; the age in which people are so industrious that they become absolutely stupid. And, harsh though it may sound, I cannot help saying that such people deserve their doom.

To say that "we live in an age in which people are so industrious as to be stupid" has a ring of contradiction, especially to a people taught to sing with Dr. Watts:

> How doth the busy little bee
> Improve each shining hour,

but, after all, what have we in the paragraph but a very honest admission that in life, too much is often sacrificed to that *eclat* of success, that too many signally fail to see that there is such a thing as losing a life while trying to gain it, that in the chase for supremacy or for wealth, the finer things are often missed. And you know, and I know, and we all know that men are overworked and under-educated, and that there is a certain culture which modern

education cannot supply. The position taken by Wilde is quite tenable to those who have been fortunate enough to read Matthew Arnold's *Literature and Dogma.* Nor is it a new truth that Wilde gives, but, on the contrary, a very old one brilliantly stated. It is the tale told by Aesop, the tale of the dog crossing the bridge with a bone in its mouth. The shadow of notoriety is grasped at and the bond of really desirable things lost forever. It is the viewpoint indicated by that sturdy individualist Sumner that the man who makes the most of himself and does his best in his sphere, is far more valuable in the long run than the philanthropist who runs about with a scheme which would set the world straight if everyone would accept it. Wilde, in his oblique way, was getting the truth home that a man is a bundle of possibilities and that it behooves each and every man to find his bent, to chart his course true to some Polaris. And, moreover, each and everyone must find his compulsion in himself. "Become what thou art," said Nietzsche.

One thing more seems necessary to say in this connection anent the crude commercialism

of America and its materializing spirit. For generations we have not only hammered away at the moral lesson, but have made the mistake of setting up a kind of god of social ambition, of domination, telling the young that with this, that and the other quality encouraged, great will be the material reward. The governmentship of the state, the presidency of the country, we have insisted, would be the goal within the reach of everyone, the height to which all should aspire, the prize within each grasp. That, of course, is pernicious nonsense, and not only nonsense but senseless social ambition. The stupidity of it may best be realized by imagining an employer inept enough to tell his hands that each of them, by being punctual and accurate, would have the management of the concern within his grasp. Apart from the untruthfulness of that because of the possibility of several developing the required qualities to the same degree, consider the foolishness. For, it is perfectly obvious that a manager of, we will say, a scrap iron business, having discovered a good man at the handles of the electric hoist, would certainly keep that man in his position and not advance him through the

auditing department and so on the road to the management. No wise manager would spoil an excellent hoist man to make an indifferent bookkeeper. To do that would be a step towards disintegration. In other words, every one in authority in the business world aims at the development of the individual and not to the inculcation of social ambition. Nationally, the same idea should be pursued on the ground that "where self-culture has ceased to be the ideal, the intellectual standard is instantly lowered." In a passage in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* we find the same idea:

> The aim of life is self-development. To realize one's nature perfectly—that is what each of us is here for. People are afraid of themselves, nowadays. They have forgotten the highest of all duties, the duty that one owes to one's self. Of course they are charitable. They feed the hungry, and clothe the beggar. But their own souls starve, and are naked.

Without individual self-development, insists Wilde, a society, a nation, must become an empty thing, a thing all front, like a Scandinavian troll. In the play *A Woman of No Importance* Wilde, emphasizing the point, puts a searing speech into the mouth of his character Hester Worsley:

You rich people in England, you don't know how you are living. How could you know? You shut out from your society the gentle and the good. You laugh at the simple and the pure. Living, as you all do, on others and by them, you sneer at self-sacrifice, and if you throw bread to the poor, it is merely to keep them quiet for a season. With all your pomp and wealth and art you don't know how to live—you don't even know that. You love the beauty that you can see and touch and handle, the beauty that you can destroy, and do destroy, but of the unseen beauty of life, of the unseen beauty of a higher life, you know nothing. You have lost life's secret. Oh, your English society seems to me shallow, selfish, foolish. It has blinded its eyes, and stopped its ears. It lies like a leper in purple. It sits like a dread thing smeared with gold. It is all wrong, all wrong.

Yes, there was a spirit of contradiction in Oscar Wilde and he delighted in awakening opposition, but looked at properly we find much that is inexorably logical beneath what seems to be tricksy humor. He made his hearers writhe while they smiled, and the writhing was salutary.

WILDE'S SPIRIT OF PARTISANSHIP

As I have said, Wilde's writings are tinged with Baudelaire, a man of strong convictions and with a very definite attitude to art and to life, who has been made a symbol of perversity

and decadence. But let that pass for the time. Granted that Charles Baudelaire had made excursions into strange dream lands by way of the opium and hashish door, it is not for us to damn any more than to deify. What engages us at this moment is Baudelaire's poetic creed and its influence upon Oscar Wilde. Baldly translated, I give the Baudelairean poetic creed thus: "Poetry . . . poetry has no other aim than itself; it cannot have any other aim, and no poem will be so great, so noble, so truly worthy of the name of poem, as that which will have been written only for the pleasure of writing a poem. I do not wish to say—be it understood — that poetry may not ennoble morals, that its final result may not be to raise men above vulgar interests. That would evidently be an absurdity. I say that, if the poet has pursued a moral aim, he has diminished his poetical power, and it is not imprudent to wager that his work will be bad. Poetry cannot, under pain of death or degradation, assimilate itself to science or to morals. It has not truth for its object, it has only itself."

It cannot be too strongly emphasized that this does not mean that there is a predilection

for things immoral, a delight in depravity and in ugliness. It simply means what should be a self evident truth, a truth accepted by all reasonable men; that art runs its course independently of morality just as it runs independently of science or of political economy; that wise men do not look for a moral lesson in works of art, should, indeed, accept poetry just as they accept music. Who, hearing a Beethoven sonata, would search for the lesson in it? Who so foolish as to seek a moral sentiment in Rubinstein's *Kammenoi-Ostrow?* Wilde's way of stating his artistic creed was very similar to Baudelaire's. Thus:

> Science is out of the reach of morals, for her eyes are fixed upon eternal truths. Art is out of the reach of morals, for her eyes are fixed upon things beautiful and immortal and ever-changing. To morals belong the lower and less intellectual spheres.

I wrote, a few paragraphs back, that Baudelaire had become a kind of symbol. A word of explanation is due. Just as Hogarth chose to picture a side of life which others of his time were either too blind, or too squeamish, or too cowardly, or too conventional minded to attempt, pictures that showed the beast in man,

the human being as Yahoo and Struldbrug, pictures a man debauched, dissipated, degraded and filthy, so has Baudelaire sung of the unwholesome things which are part of our artificial life—of vice, and crime, and corruption. Very engagingly too he dabbles in things esoteric and diabolical. Take that little prose poem, *The Generous Player*—a tale in which the chief character sells his soul to the devil on condition that he shall be free from boredom for the remainder of his days, but, after the compact is made, begins to doubt with horror whether his satanic majesty will keep his word. So, to reassure himself, he prays in semi-slumber: "My God; Lord my God! Let it be that the Devil keep his word." It is a queer tale and there are others akin to it, but each must read for himself, must try to understand the peculiar attraction for, not only the diabolical, but the loathsome, the morbid, the criminal and the lewd had for the Frenchman. Of course, the more Baudelaire was attacked for his supposed immorality the more extravagant he became. Still, he was a great poet and a master of the word.

Unfortunately, somehow, we are inclined to

overlook the fact that it is not Frenchmen alone who have pictured the horrible. We forget Morrison with his *Tales of Mean Streets*, Caradoc Evans with his stories of sordid poverty and crime in the Welsh hill-country, Thomas Burke and his dock-land sketches. But pass all that. Enamored of Baudelaire, Wilde's work became affected just as Swinburne's work was by the same influence, and, in another branch of art, Aubrey Beardsley's. But let us not overlook the fact that there is everywhere manifested a vast interest in the odd and the bazarre, in the occult and the fantastic. That peculiar interest accounts for the popularity of others besides those whose names I have mentioned; Poe, for instance, and Ambrose Bierce, and Zola, and Gautier and DeMaupassant. It accounted for the vast interest which, as Frank Harris tells us, was manifested in Wilde's poem, *The Harlot's House*, as a poem slight enough, but as a picture very attractive, as all forbidden things are attractive.

> We caught the tread of dancing feet,
> We loitered down the moonlit street,
> And stopped beneath the harlot's house.

Inside, above the din and fray,
We heard the loud musicians play
The "Treues Liebes Herz" of Strauss.

Like strange mechanical grotesques,
Making fantastic arabesques,
The shadows raced across the blind.

We watched the ghostly dancers spin
To sound of horn and violin,
Like black leaves wheeling in the wind.

Like wire-pulled automatons,
Slim silhouetted skeletons
Went sidling through the slow quadrille.

They took each other by the hand,
And danced a stately saraband;
Their laughter echoed thin and shrill.

Sometimes a clockwork puppet pressed
A phantom lover to her breast,
Sometimes they seemed to try to sing.

Sometimes a horrible marionette
Came out, and smoked its cigarette
Upon the steps like a live thing.

Then, turning to my love, I said,
"The dead are dancing with the dead,
The dust is whirling with the dust."

Baudelaire, and Wilde as well, sometimes ran *fanti*, just as men in arguments are intoxicated with their own verbosity. So we find Wilde in the warmth of his partizanship not only couching a lance for Baudelaire, but handling

edged swords, to be wounded later with his own weapons. Thus:

What is termed Sin is an essential element of progress. Without it the world would stagnate, or grow old, or become colorless. By its curiosity, Sin increases the experience of the race. Through its intensified assertion of individualism, it saves us from monotony of type. In its rejection of the current notions about morality, it is one with the higher ethics. And as for the virtues! What are the virtues? Nature, M. Renan tells us, cares little about chastity and it may be that it is to the shame of Magdalen, and not to their own purity, that the Lucretias of modern life owe their freedom from stain. Charity, as even those of whose religion it makes a formal part have been compelled to acknowledge, creates a multitude of evils. The mere existence of conscience, that faculty of which people prate so much nowadays, and are so ignorantly proud, is a sign of our imperfect development. It must be merged in instinct before we become fine. Self-denial is simply a method by which man arrests his progress, and self-sacrifice a survival of the mutilation of the savage, part of that old worship of pain which is so terrible a factor in the history of the world, and which even now makes its victims day by day, and has its altars in the land. Virtues! Who knows what the virtues are? Not you. Not I. Not any one. It is well for our vanity that we slay the criminal, for if we suffered him to live he might show us what we had gained by his crime. It is well for his peace that the saint goes to his martyrdom. He is spared the sight of the horror of his harvest.—*The Critic as Artist.*

That, which played a great part in Wilde's trial, is apparently a kind of advocacy of the M. Fr. Paulhan point of view, (*Le Nouveau Mysticisme*, page 94) the Decadent philosophy dished up and watered for British consumption. Baudelaire had said that "the vulgar sought goodness as an end," and Wilde had this:

> To be good, according to the vulgar standard of goodness, is obviously quite easy. It merely requires a certain amount of sordid terror, a certain lack of imaginative thought, and a certain low passion for middle-class respectability.—*The Critic as Artist.*

Instances might be multiplied, but enough has been said to show that Wilde not only depended for effects upon a manifestation of his spirit of contradiction, but somewhat suffered in his art because of his partizanship. Still, of his originality there can be no doubt and a partizan is not necessarily a plagiarist.

As to the charge of plagiarism, while others have charged Wilde with the literary sin, it remained for his former friend, Lord Alfred Douglas, to be the most bitter in denunciation. "His (Wilde's) sonnets are, for the most part. Miltonic in their effects; the metre and

method of *In Memoriam* are used in the greater number of his lyrics; and he used the metre which Tennyson sealed to himself for all time even in *The Sphinx*, which is his great set work; while in such pieces as *Charmides*, *Panthea*, *Humanitad* and *The Burden of Itys* he borrowed the grave pipe of Matthew Arnold." Writing of the poem *Le Mer*, Douglas says: "The Bird is Wilde, the plumage and call are Tennyson's to a fault." Again, "While Wilde arranges the stanzas as though they consisted of two lines, they really consist of Tennyson's four . . . Tennyson's suns as well as Tennyson's stanza!" In another place Douglas writes: "I have not space to enter into great detail with regard to those lyrics of Wilde which are not flatly Tennysonian. There are about twenty of them, and they include a cheap imitation of *La Belle Dame sans Merci*, a flagrant copy of Hood's lines beginning 'Take her up tenderly'—(Douglas refers to the poem *The Bridge of Sighs*)—and sundry pieces which are childishly reminiscent of Mrs. Browning, William Morris and even Jean Ingelow. . . . Wilde was an over-sedulous ape, so over-sedulous, in fact, that he is careful to

emphasize and exaggerate the very faults and defects of his masters."

Douglas is bitter as gall and, like the gallant Michael Monahan, I prefer to quote him with the sonnet he wrote on learning of the death of Oscar Wilde:

I dreamed of him last night, I saw his face
All radiant and unshadowed of distress,
And as of old, in music measureless,
I heard his golden voice and marked him trace
Under the common thing the hidden grace,
And conjure wonder out of emptiness,
Till mean things put on beauty like a dress,
And all the world was an enchanted place.
And then methought outside a fast-locked gate
I mourned the loss of unrecorded words,
Forgotten tales and mysteries half said,
Wonders that might have been articulate,
And voiceless thoughts like murdered singing birds,
And so I woke and knew that he was dead!

It leaves a sweeter taste in the mouth.

AS FICTION WRITER

Possessed with the spirit of contradiction, obsessed with the Baudelairean diabolism, Wilde tried his hand at fiction with curious results. Be it remembered that he was one of those odd and lucky individuals in whom bubble up at all times plots and ideas and

situations capable of being used in the making of stories. Such minds see not only the thing before them, a man and a woman, we will say, walking towards one another over a bridge, but with a leap into a strange world of possibilities or probabilities, there is conjured up within them a thousand visions of things odd and fantastic, which might happen. It is not even correct to say that they are men of great imagination—they are more than that. They are, in a respect, tortured men, men whose minds project them into all kinds of situations. They themselves die a thousand deaths, suffer a thousand sorrows and pains, are torn with a thousand griefs. You see that kind of character in Charles Dickens who is always on the verge of tears or laughter, enjoying life, actually enjoying it with Micawber, with Pickwick, with Sam Weller, with Cap'n Cuttle, with the Crummeles: suffering with Oliver Twist, with Sidney Carton, with his little Nell, with his Tom Pinch. Such men live the lives that they portray and there is a vast gulf separating them from those writers who artistically contrive their characters but keep themselves apart from them as a Creator is apart from

his creatures. Thackeray for instance, who will paint for you a Beatrix, a Henry Esmond, a Harry Warrington, a Madam Bernstein, a Captain Costigan, but who will step down as it were, among his audience, and comment upon the characters upon the stage; sometimes, indeed, interrupt his narrative to point a moral. Of that sort too was Trollope: of the other sort was George Eliot. Yet, in both cases, in the case of Dickens as well as in the case of Thackeray, with George Eliot as with Trollope, you have accurate pictures of life and of society, and the prejudices, the motives, the ambitions the form and construction of the mind of the fictional personages are as evident to the reader as if he lived in their very presence.

Accepting Dickens and Thackeray as examples, we see Wilde with that peculiar constitution of mind which made him prone to identify himself with his characters, but, again, he had that streak of perversity in him which refused to allow the characters he imagined to act a rational way or to live in a rational world. There was in him that childish and destructive habit of destroying his own toys, the habit we see in Chesterton who paints pic-

tures perfectly credible in his Auberons and Barkers and Quins, but sets them to doing fantastic tricks, standing on their heads, running about in queer disguises and undertaking to do things that would, in a sane society, promptly land them in the lunatic asylum. And, of course, with the trick of perversity, Wilde had that Baudelairean bent.

With what has been said kept in mind, consider Wilde's story, *Lord Arthur Savile's Crime*, which appeared in the *Court and Society Review* in 1887 and in book form in 1891. In the story you have a mimic world that is a faithful reflection of the contemporary world with its lords and ladies and society folk of wealth, hobnobbing with poets, socialists, nihilists, sceptics and odd characters. To verify the truth of his picture of the reception at Bentick house, one has but to turn to the pages of the newspapers of the day, the society journals rather, and mark the names of those in the public eye: Lady Jeune, William Morris, Prince Kropotkine, Burne Jones, Labouchere, the Positivist crowd with Frederic Harrison and his friends, the theosophists with Madam Blavatsky and Sinnett, the agnostics with Annie

Besant and Stewart Ross and Dr. Marsh; others too, Cunninghame Graham, Bernard Shaw, Belfort Bax, Walter Crane. Such a gathering is hardly possible in America where there is no democracy, but, instead, an aristocracy of wealth. It was, and is, quite possible in the older country in which there is a real democracy, where two impulses are present, a respect for tradition and for visible authority and a regard for precedent on the one hand, and on the other a regard for certain abstract principles and a strong sense of the value of individual judgment. Between an organized aristocracy and an organic people things are balanced and the triumph of one does not develop into despotism, nor does the triump of the other result in sullen mob rule. So, as I say, the picture of the reception is perfectly credible and Wilde paints well, as well as Dickens paints when he tells us of the belfry in *The Chimes*, or of Fountain Court in his *Martin Chuzzlewit*.

But now mark the Wilde who twists things, who, in a stage set for things as they are, chooses, in his contradictory spirit to bring in events as they are not at all apt to be.

One of his characters is a palmist and to him goes the hero, Lord Arthur Savile. The palmist, Mr. Podgers, tells his client that his fate is read—that he is to become a murderer. Now see the odd kink, the paradox. Lord Savile, being about to marry, finds his mind occupied with the prediction. So, since it is decreed that he must do murder, the sooner it is done and out of the way, the better. There is a kind of Benvenuto Cellini touch here, the Cellini who when at work in his shop finds his brain on fire because a fellow has annoyed him, so rushes out dagger in hand to stab him and have done with it; the Cellini who finding himself filled with amatory desire while at work, satisfies himself with his model and gets to work again. So Wilde's Lord Savile. To him it does not very much matter who the victim is, so he tries to poison an aunt and fails, then attemps to kill an uncle with an infernal machine. Disgusted with his ill success he takes a walk along the Thames embankment to ponder, when his eyes lights upon the palmist leaning on the parapet with folded arms, gazing into the black depth. Then:

In a moment he had seized Mr. Podgers by the

legs and flung him into the Thames. There was a course oath, a heavy splash, and all was still. Lord Arthur looked anxiously over, but could see nothing of the cheiromantist but a tall hat, pirouetting in an eddy of moonlit water. After a time it sank, and no trace of Mr. Podgers was visible. Once he thought that he caught sight of the bulky misshapen figure striking out for the staircase of the bridge, and a horrible feeling of failure came over him, but it turned out to be merely a reflection, and when the moon shone out from behind a cloud it passed away. At last he seemed to have realized the decree of destiny. He heaved a deep sigh of relief, and Sybil's name came to his lips.

You see the kink, or course. A murder with no cause. A murder and no remorse. The victim rather a scarecrow kind of figure. And you see also, the Baudelairean gesture properly watered for English consumption. Bear in mind, too, the quotation made a few pages ago from *The Critic as Artist*, relating to sin as an essential element of progress.

Of course, the story is all tricksy fooling and certainly not worth while. It is thin stuff, poor stuff, unworthy stuff and all this largely because insincere and imitative. One seems to see Wilde starting seriously enough, to break off at a tangent with a discordant burst of laughter. But here is a point to consider.

Had Wilde been accused of murder, and placed on trial, what hidden tendency think you, would have been discovered by a keen lawyer in the book? There's matter for thought there.

We pass to the longer story, *The Picture of Dorian Gray.* In this, Wilde tried to do something new, putting indeed, into the mouth of one of his characters his ideal: "to write a novel that would be as lovely as a Persian carpet, and as unreal." He did, or attempted more, endeavoring to break away from the English tradition and write a novel with no love interest as motive. A task glorious enough to be sure, for, as every thoughtful man must have realizes, the Anglo-Saxon is not obsessed with sex. The acquisition of a woman is by no means the greatest thing in life, nor is it the thing that absorbs a man. Marriage is a mere incident. Other things occupy his mind far more than sex: business, for example, and art, and ambition.

Now the story thread of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is slight enough. A picture has been painted by Dorian's friend, and, while the subject of the picture retains his youth

and beauty, the picture ages, the face on the canvas reflecting the life of the man, showing the stigmata of a life of folly, of vice, of lust of hypocrisy. The discovery of the change is thus described:

"You won't? Then I must do it myself," said the young man; and he tore the curtain from its rod, and flung it on the ground.

An exclamation of horror broke from Hallward's lips as he saw in the dim light the hideous thing on the canvas leering at him. There was something in its expression that filled him with disgust and loathing. Good heavens! it was Dorian Gray's own face that he was looking at! The horror, whatever it was, had not yet entirely marred that marvelous beauty. There was still some gold in the thinning hair and some scarlet on the sensual lips. The sodden eyes had kept something of the loveliness of their blue, the noble curves had not yet passed entirely away from chiseled nostrils and from plastic throat. Yes, it was Dorian himself. But who had done it? He seemed to recognize his own brushwork, and the frame was his own design. The idea was monstrous, yet he felt afraid. He seized the lighted candle, and held it to the picture. In the left hand corner was his own name, traced in long letters of bright vermilion.

It was some foul parody, some infamous, ignoble satire.

Hallward turned again to the portrait, and gazed at it. "My God! if it is true," he exclaimed, "and this is what you have done with your life, why, you must be worse even that those who talk against

you fancy you to be!" He held the light up again to the canvas, and examined it. The surface seemed to be quite undisturbed, and as he had left it. It was from within, apparently, that the foulness and horror had come. Through some strange quickening of inner life the leprosies of sin were slowly eating the thing away. The rotting of a corpse in a watery grave was not so fearful.

A mere extract, of course, robs the scene of its vitality, but still, Wilde does not stir in the reader the passion of horror that a true artist should. Compare the scene with that never-to-be-forgotten page in Conrad's *Secret Agent* where the woman thrusts the carving knife into the heart of her husband, or the latter part of *Le Pere Goriot* where Balzac bruises the reader's heart as he tells of the torture of anguish; or the picture in Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* where Steyne is knocked down. The truth is that Wilde, as Ross told Blunt, was forever thinking of his style, and when a man has his pose in mind, he is not very apt to lay the lash on heavily. Machen, in his *Hieroglyphics*, has had much to say on the ecstasy of writers, much that is well worth reading, and he proves his point to the hilt. That ecstasy, Wilde lacked. Within him were no eternal tempests. Never could he

say with Byron, "I have written from the fulness of my mind, from passion, from impulse, from many motives but not from their sweet voices." Wilde did write for "sweet voices" and, consequently he lacked much that a writer of fiction requires. Turn to the passage in the *Secret Agent*, which I have mentioned, read it and compare it with this, the death of Dorian Gray. Wilde seems sluggish, uninterested, aloof.

Inside, in the servants' part of the house, the half clad domestics were talking in low whispers to each other. Old Mrs. Leaf was crying, and wringing her hands. Francis was as pale as death.

After about a quarter of an hour, he got the coachman and one of the footmen and crept upstairs. They knocked, but there was no reply. They called out. Everything was still. Finally, after vainly trying to force the door, they got on the roof, and dropped down on to the balcony. The windows yielded easily; the bolts were old.

When they entered, they found hanging upon the wall a splendid portrait of their master as they had last seen him, in all the wonder of his exquisite youth and beauty. Lying on the floor was a dead man, in evening dress, with a knife in his heart. He was withered, wrinkled and loathsome of visage. It was not till they had examined the rings that they recognized who it was.

The most patient of readers, is surfeited in the book with long, descriptive, catalogue-like

passages telling of the fantastic pursuits of Dorian Gray, a literary trick evidently imitative of certain French writers — Barres, Huysmans and Villiers de l'Lsle Adam. Indeed, in places, the character Dorian Gray is strongly reminiscent of the character Des Essientes who "with his vaporizers injected into his room an essence formed of ambrosia, Mitcham lavender, sweet pea, ess, boquet. . . ." There is much more of it in the pages of *A Rebours*. As I say, Wilde proved himself to be very imitative. You must read his ninth chapter, but a single quotation will give some idea:

> And so he would now study perfumes, and the secrets of their manufacture, distilling heavily scented oils, and burning odorous gums from the East. He saw that there was no mood of the mind that had not its counterpart in the sensuous life, and set himself to discover their true relations, wondering what there was in frankincense that made one mystical, and in ambergris that stirred one's passions, and in violets that woke the memory of dead romances, and in musk that troubled the brain, and in champak that stained the imagination; and seeking often to elaborate a real psychology of perfumes, and to estimate the several influences of sweet-smelling roots, and scented pollen-laden flowers, of aromatic balms, and of dark and fragrant woods, of spikenard that sickens of

hovenia that makes men mad, and of aloes that are said to be able to expel melancholy from the soul.

Dorian Gray collects many things, plays with many things, to chase away his *ennui*: musical instruments, jewels, embroideries, ecclesiastical vestments, and there are long catalogues in the case of each one similar to that given above in relation to perfumes. There are pages, especially in the ninth chapter that remind the reader of nothing more than a great storehouse with Wilde standing before jumbled piles, picking this thing after that in the manner of a suave auctioneer and commenting upon are article quite oblivious of the fact that his hearers yawn, and that no real business is being done.

There is, all through the book, the Baudelairean influence. Dorian Gray becomes very like the owls of Baudelaire sitting in a row, in his moods of inactivity. Nor is the Baudelairean interest in crime and criminals unimitated. Dorian ponders over strange things: over Gian Maria who used hounds to chase living men and whose murdered body was

"covered with roses by a harlot who had loved him; the Borgia on his white horse, with Fratricide

riding beside him, and his mantle stained with the blood of Perotto; Petro Riario, the young Cardinal Archbishop of Florence, child and minion of Sextus IV., whose beauty was equaled only by his debauchery, and who received Leonora of Aragon in a pavilion of white and crimson silk, filled with nymphs and centaurs, and gilded a boy that he might serve her at the feast as Ganymede or Hylas; Ezzelin, whose melancholy could be cured only by the spectacle of death, and who had a passion for red blood, as other men have for red wine—the son of the fiend, as was reported, and one who had cheated his father at dice when gambling with him for his own soul; Giambattista Cibo, who in mockery took the name of Innocent, and into whose torpid veins the blood of three lads was infused by a Jewish doctor; Sigismondo Malatesta, the lover of Isotta, and the lord of Rimini, whose effigy was burned at Rome, as the enemy of God and man, who strangled Polyssena with a napkin, and gave poison to Ginevra d'Este in a cup of emerald, and in honor of a shameful passion built a pagan church for Christian worship; Charles VI., who had so wildly adored his brother's wife that a leper had warned him of the insanity that was coming on him, and who could only be soothed by Saracen cards painted with the images of Love and Death and Madness; and, in his trimmed jerkin and jeweled cap and acanthus-like curls, Grifonetto Baglioni, who slew Astorre with his bride, and Simonetto with his page, and whose comeliness was such that, as he lay dying in the yellow piazza of Perugia, those who had hated him could not choose but weep, and Atalanta, who had cursed him, blessed him."

The truth is, that in the character Dorian Gray, Wilde portrayed not a normal man, but one who comes very near the border line of being what Krafft-Ebing would have termed a degenerate. Certainly he shows a moral insensibility, a lack of proper judgment and ethical ideas. His egoistic ambition is unlimited and he is full of a sentimentality that is shallow cant. The book made a sensation and estimates of it ranged from the zenith to nadir. There were those who extolled it and those who damned it, just as there were those that extolled and others that damned *Jurgen* and *Ulysses*, as there were those that raised Rossetti to the skies and others who charged him with all sorts of artistic sins and said things anent the extolling of fleshliness as the distinct and supreme end of pictorial and poetic art.

The thing that is rare and valuable in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is the vivid coloring, the effect of an atmosphere of expensive and highly artificial life and cultured luxury; the florid and poetic style. He depicts a highly artificial life and idealizes it. He portrays a quite impossible world, as impossible as the world of pastoral poetry where meadows were

inhabited by youths and maidens who guided sheep and carried beribboned crooks, and conversed in rhymed iambic octosyllables, and danced and sang. For, in your experience doubtless as in mine, never has man talked to man, off of a chautauquan platform, like this:

"Let us go and sit in the shade," said Lord Henry. "Parker has brought out the drinks, and if you stay any longer in this glare you will be quite spoiled, and Basil will never paint you again. You really must not let yourself become sunburned. It would be very unbecoming to you."

"What does it matter?" cried Dorian, laughing, as he sat down on the seat at the end of the garden.

"It should matter everything to you, Mr. Gray."

"Why?'

"Because you have now the most marvelous youth, and youth is the one thing worth having."

"I don't feel that, Lord Henry.'

"No, you don't feel it now. Some day, when you are old and wrinkled and ugly, when thought has seared your forehead with its lines, and passion branded your lips with its hideous fires, you will feel it, you will feel it terribly. Now, wherever you go, you charm the world. Will it always be so?

"You have a wonderfully beautiful face, Mr. Gray. Don't frown. You have. And Beauty is a form of Genius—is higher, indeed, than Genius, as it needs no explanation. It is one of the great facts of the world, like sun-light, or spring-time, or the reflection in dark waters of that silver shell we call the moon. It can not be questioned. It has its

divine right of sovereignty. It makes princes of those who have it. You smile? Ah! when you have lost it you won't smile.

"People say sometimes that Beauty is only superficial. That may be so. But at least it is not so superficial as Thought. To me, Beauty is the wonder of wonders. It is only shallow people who do not judge by appearances. The true mystery of the world is the visible, not the invisible.

But Wilde was idealizing, making deliberately an untrue, but charming picture—doing indeed in another way what old Izaak Walton did in his *Compleat Angler*, or what John Fletcher did in his *Faithful Shepherdess*.

As for the vivid coloring of which I spoke, read this:

"The studio was filled with the rich odor of roses, and when the light summer wind stirred amid the trees of the garden there came through the open door the heavy scent of the lilac, or the more delicate perfume of the pink-flowering thorn.

From the corner of the divan of Persian saddle-bags on which he was lying, smoking, as usual, innumerable cigarettes, Lord Henry Wotton could just catch the gleam of the honey-sweet and honey-colored blossoms of the laburnum, whose tremulous branches seemed hardly able to bear the burden of a beauty so flame-like as theirs; and now and then the fantastic shadows of birds in flight flitted across the long tussore-silk curtains that were stretched in front of the huge windows, producing a kind of momentary Japanese effect, and making

him think of those pallid jade-faced painters who, in an art that is necessarily immobile, seek to convey the sense of swiftness and motion. The sullen murmur of the bees shouldering their way through the long unmown grass, or circling with monotonous insistence round the black-crocketed spires of the early June hollyhocks, seemed to make the stillness more oppressive, and the dim roar of London was like the bourdon note of a distant organ."

You see from that what Wilde meant when he made his character express a wish to write a novel that would be as lovely as a Persian carpet. I think that in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Wilde started with the Persian carpet in his mind's eye, but sometimes lapsed into the carelessness of a wool sack maker. He is not innocent of passages suugestive of the transpontine drama. But that we overlook in sheer delight at his joy in magnificence.

A last word on *The Picture of Dorian Gray.* It appeared at the end of a time when the English world was full of books with a purpose, such books as Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward*, Edna Lyell's sentimental agnosticism, Grant Allen's *Woman Who Did*, and, at the same time, there was a lively stream of Zola translations, much energetic, realistic stuff

very comparable with the work of Sherwood Anderson of our day. To go further, there was much of the kind of fiction, conventionally unconventional on the order of the present day Ben Hecht. There was George Moore, too. The strictly conventional had Hall Caine, Miss Braddon and Mrs. Henry Wood, writers of the stripe of Harold Bell Wright and Gene Stratton Porter. Oscar Wilde struck a path away from all that kind of thing and swung towards a modified romanticism, a something that should not be literary photography. His attempt was rather to lead away from the morass of realism into the valley of idealism. You get the idea somewhat in the Shakespearean lesson that

> Nature is made better by no mean,
> But Nature makes that mean; so o'er that art,
> Which, you say, adds to Nature, is an art
> That Nature makes. . . . This is an art
> Which does mend Nature—change it rather: but
> The art itself is Nature.

So we come to the fairy tales of Oscar Wilde, the best by far of which is *The Happy Prince.* These naturally gave Wilde full scope for his passion for color and luxury and decorative effects. But Wilde's fairy tales were fairy tales for grown ups and not for children. Indeed,

it is safe to say that for small folk who are in the Grimm's Fairy Tale age, they do not stand the test of reading aloud—the only test in a children's book. Oliver Goldsmith observed wittily that Dr. Johnson made his little fish talk like great whales. Oscar Wilde made his fairy animals and creatures talk like Oscar Wilde. Try this on a child and observe the effect. "Tomorrow my friends will fly up to the Second Cataract. The river horse couches there among the bulrushes and on a great granite throne sits the great God Memnon. All night long he watches the stars, and when the morning star shines, he utters one cry of joy and then is silent. At noon the yellow lions come down to the water's edge to drink. They have eyes like green beryls, and their roar is louder than the roar of the Cataract."

It would be waste of space to spend words on what children do, and do not, appreciate. Had Wilde sought a guide, he could have taken none better than his contemporary, Walter Crane. One careful study of Walter Crane's illustrations to Grimm's household stories, the picture of the Sleeping Beauty for example, would have been sufficient. But Wilde was not

writing for children, nor had he the faculty of doing so. What Wilde cared about was his style—consideration of that filled his horizon. Besides, his fairy tales carried altogether too obvious a moral lesson. Children demand simplicity, and simplicity and Oscar Wilde were ever strangers. The single tale, *The Happy Prince*, be it said, is in altogether a different category. Wilde must have written it because he wished to write it. Turning to the bibliography of Oscar Wilde, I find that in every case, when fellow authors have written about the book of fairy tales, there has been mention of *The Happy Prince.* Walter Pater mentions it in a letter dated June 12th, to Oscar Wilde: it is mentioned in a poem printed in the Harliquinade; Thomas Hutchinson has a dedication to Oscar Wilde in his Jolts and Jingles

"To you who wrote The Happy Prince,
The sweetest tale of modern time. . ."

Next appeared *The House of Pomgranates*, dedicated to Mrs. Wilde, a book of tales frankly written for grown up folk in whom the love of Romance is not dead. It was not a financial success and the stock was sold off as a remainder. Wrote Wilde to the editor of the Pall

Mall Gazette: "..in building this House of Pomgranates, I had about as much intention of pleasing the British child as I had of pleasing the British public." In another letter he compares his situation as writer of fairy tales with Andersen's, saying that the true admirer of fairy tales was to be found "not in the nursery, but on Parnassus."

True, equally with Hans Christian Andersen, Oscar Wilde might have written fairy stories because it pleased him to do so, but between the method of the two men there was a gulf of difference. Andersen wrote because he wanted to, but he wanted to do things that would please children. Wilde wrote because he wanted to, but he wanted to do things that would please himself. The fuss aesthetic is the one thing that fairies will not put up with, the atmosphere that destroys credibility. Wilde's fantastic creatures were sophisticated rather than simple, often self-conscious, like precocious children, hot house beings eager for applause of their elders. Andersen's fairy folk were simple, dream-creatures that could stand cold water and clear air and sunshine. In Wilde there is elegance always, but never ras-

cally gaiety. In Andersen there is quiet unobtrusiveness, never cleverness nor facetiousness.

THE STAGE

It would seem that in some mysterious way, all things pointed to success for Wilde as a playwright. His love for gorgeous scenes, for spectacular effects, for swift surprises, for witty dialogue, for neat, staccato sentences, for the brilliant social life, for silver laughter—all these were ingredients for success on the boards. More, in his essays, we find the result of his study of the theater, a study concerning itself sagely with stage, with scenery, with effects, with management. As spectator and as critic, he accumulated a vast store of knowledge and we find him, in *Lady Windermere's Fan*, experimenting with that knowledge. As Shaw pointed out, Wilde played with everything; with wit, with philosophy, with drama, with actors and audience, with the whole theater.

Wilde's appearance on the English stage was as a bright star in a dark sky. His advent caused a flutter like the advent of Sheridan. It was a time when the theater had sunk, when stage craft had slipped into the slough of spec-

tacularity. People flocked, here to see the dresses that Mrs. Patrick-Campbell wore, there to see Wilson Barrett in the lime light with his subordinates duly subordinate, to another place to gaze at the spectacles provided by Augustus Harris, to the music halls for an exhibition of strong animal spirits and physical agility, to the Lyceum to bathe in the heroics of Henry Irving, to melodramas, to pantomimes, to acting versions of old plays that were little more than falsifications. "Nobody goes to the theater," wrote Shaw in 1896, "except the people who also go to Madame Tussaud's. Nobody writes for it, unless he is hopelessly stage struck and cannot help himself. It has no share of the leadership of thought; it does not even reflect the current. It does not create beauty; it apes fashion. It does not produce personal skill; our actors and actresses, with the exceptions of a few persons of natural gifts and graces, mostly miscultivated or half cultivated, are simply the middle class section of the residuum. The curt insult with which Matthew Arnold dismissed it from consideration found it and left it utterly defenseless." And it was into a theater world thus described,

that Oscar Wilde stepped with his skill and cultivated taste.

The situation was much as it is today in the world of moving picture production, a situation extremely demoralizing to true art in which, by what we may call the star system, a few short sighted managers strive to obtain vast wealth. I say demoralizing to art, because in time the public wearies of its stars, and, having been educated to no standard, deserts the field. I point to the moving picture world as analogy, because in spite of all the advertisements of the correspondence schools featuring scenario work as the way to fame, it is pretty well admitted that today plays are written for actors, for stars, and actors do not exist to act. Therefore we have, perforce, so much that is sensational, childish or merely vulgar; so little on the screen that is artistic.

But Wilde with his wit, his gentle mirth, and, above all, his pose as egotist, took London by storm. It was a real triumph of ability over ineptitude. There was a delightful page written by A. B. Walkeley in the *Speaker* at the time *Lady Windermere's Fan* was produced, a passage that gives an admirable picture of not

only the play, but the author, and it is easy to imagine the astonishment of the fashionable audience at the St. James's Theater. "The man or woman who does not chuckle with delight at the good things which abound in *Lady Windemere's Fan* should consult a physician at once; delay would be dangerous. Of Mr. Oscar Wilde's coming forward at the end, cigarette in hand, to praise his players, like a preface of Victor Hugo, and to commend his own play, 'of which I am sure, ladies and gentlemen, you estimate the merits almost as highly as I do myself,' you will already have read. I am still chortling...at its exquisite impertinence."

There was something new indeed for London: piquancy, pungency, wit, ingenious situations—to cap all, a throwing overboard of the conventional self-depreciation and a public self glorification. Wilde, clever, lucky, amiable, was a Beaumarchais re-divivus. He walked into his place like a monarch: considered his new position to be his birthright. Life became to him as a holiday. I think that my friend Haldeman-Julius hit the mark when he said to me, one day, that Wilde would live for posterity as

Sheridan has lived. There is a singular resemblance between the two men indeed. Lord Byron, the friend of Sheridan, has left on record his opinion that he had never heard nor conceived of a more extraordinary conversationalist: has told us how men spent nights listening to him: has told us that no one equaled him at a supper: has told us how he retained his wit even when drunk. It is Wilde to a hair. There was, in Wilde, the sparkling individuality of the author of *The School for Scandal*, the sustained brilliancy, the infinite variety, the inexhaustible vigor. Both men had the art of repartee, of heaping witticism on witticism and happy phrase on phrase in a fine crescendo. Both had the gift of satire—not the satire of Swift to biting and stinging, but the satire of La Bruyere, a satire that hides behind a gracious smile. One is inclined to think that the plays are too good for acting, so swiftly comes arrow after arrow of wit.

Vicomte de Nanjac (*approaching*). Ah, the English young lady is the dragon of good taste, is she not? Quite the dragon of good taste.

Lord Goring. So the newspapers are always telling us.

Vicomte de Nanjac. I read all your English newspapers. I find them so amusing.

Lord Goring. Then, my dear Nanjac, you must certainly read between the lines.

Vicomte de Nanjac. I should like to, but my professor objects. (*To* MABEL CHILTERN.) May I have the pleasure of escorting you to the music-room, Mademoiselle?

Mabel Chiltern (*looking very disappointed*). Delighted, Vicomte, quite delighted! (*Turning to* LORD GORING.) Aren't you coming to the music-room?

Lord Goring. Not if there is any music going on, Miss Mabel.

Mabel Chiltern (*severely*). The music is in German. You would not understand it. (*Goes out with the* VICOMTE DE NANJAC. LORD CAVERSHAM *comes up to his son.*)

Lord Caversham. Well, sir! what are you doing here? Wasting your life as usual You should be in bed, sir. You keep too late hours! I heard of you the other night at Lady Rufford's dancing till four o'clock in the morning!

Lord Goring. Only a quarter to four, father.

Lord Caversham. Can't make out how you stand London society. The thing has gone to the dogs, a lot of damned nobodies talking about nothing.

Lord Goring. I love talking about nothing, father. It is the only thing I know anything about.

Lord Caversham. You seem to me to be living entirely for pleasure.

Lord Goring. What else is there to live for, father? Nothing ages like happiness.

—*An Ideal Husband* (*Act I.*)

I choose, deliberately, the less talked of portions of the plays I quote. Here again:

Lady Hunstanton. We who are wives don't belong to any one.

Lady Stutfield. Oh, I am so very, very glad to hear you say so.

Lady Hunstanton. But do you really think, dear Caroline, that legislation would improve matters in any way? I am told that, nowadays, all the married men live like bachelors, and all the bachelors like married men.

Mrs. Allonby. I certainly never know one from the other.

Lady Stutfield. Oh, I think one can always know at once whether a man has home claims upon his life or not. I have noticed a very, very sad expression in the eyes of so many married men.

Mrs. Allonby. Ah, all that I have noticed is that they are horribly tedious when they are good husbands, and abominably conceited when they are not.

Lady Hunstanton. Well, I suppose the type of husband has completely changed since my young days, but I'm bound to state that poor dear Hunstanton was the most delightful of creatures, and as good as gold.

Mrs. Allonby. Ah, my husband is a sort of promissory note; I am tired of meeting him.

Lady Caroline. But you renew him from time to time, don't you?

Mrs. Allonby. Oh no, Lady Caroline. I have only had one husband as yet. I suppose you look upon me as quite an amateur.

Lady Caroline. With your views on life I wonder you married at all.

Mrs. Allonby. So do I.

—*A Woman of No Importance* (*Act II.*)

Compare such a discharge of wit with the current popular "Revue" with its slap stick farce, its reference to booze, to negroes, to sporting drummers and the absurd bids for applause by a little thrown in about the flag —and let us hope that we may produce a Wilde.

But for sheer color and gorgeous vision, Wilde achieved nothing better than his unpublished Burmese Masque, *For Love of the King.* As in a lightning flash the eye takes in a scene of wondrous richness. King Beng on his ruby sewn cushion; the blinding blue of an eastern sky; the hundred waiting elephants; the peacocks; the silken banners "propelled with measured rhythm"; the tables and chairs piled high with fruits on golden dishes; the flower crowned courtiers and dancing girls, some half nude, others splendidly robed. But everywhere that intense brightness of a sunlit scene. There is little in the Masque that would make it attractive to a stage manager, much that should attract a scenario man. Indeed, it reads as though Wilde had visualized the possibilities of the screen world. I copy from Act II, Scene I:

"The jungle once more. Time; noonday. In

place of the hut is a building, half Burmese, half Italian villa, of white, thick wood, with curled roofs rising on roofs gilded and adorned with spiral carvings and a myriad golden and jewel-incrusted bells. On the broad verandahs are thrown Eastern carpets, rugs, embroideries.

"The world is sun soaked. The surrounding trees stand sentinel like in the burning light. Burmese servants squat motionless, smoking on the broad white steps that lead from the house to the garden. The crows croak drowsily at intervals. Parrot's scream intermittently. The sound of a guitar playing a Venetian love song can be heard coming from the interior. Otherwise life apparently sleeps."

It is an arabesque: it is a something very like that novel Wilde wanted to write, the novel that was to have been as splendid as a Persian rug; it is a word weaving in silk and gold and splendid feathers taken from quetzal, and peacock, and golden crested wren. It is, in a word, Oscar Wilde in his glory; a free fantasia of description; a rhapsodie of color.

As may well be imagined, Wilde was the target of the dramatic critics of his day, especially of those of the malignant type. The type is not unfamiliar and Coleridge has characterized it.

No private grudge they need, no personal spite;
The *viva sectio* is its own delight!
All enmity, all envy, they disclaim,

Disinterested thieves of our good name;
Cool, sober murderers of their neighbor's fame.

But Wilde was no Keats to be wounded by abuse. For instance, consider his letter to *St. James's Gazette* from which I copy a paragraph as follows:

". . . When criticism becomes in England a real art, as it should be, and when none but those of artistic instincts and artistic cultivation is allowed to write about works of art, artists will, no doubt, read criticisms with a certain amount of intellectual interest. As things are a present, the criticisms of ordinary newspapers are of no interest whatsoever, except in so far as they display, in its crudest form, the Boetianism of a country that has produced some Athenians, and in which some Athenians have come to dwell."

Much that passed as adverse criticism of Wilde's dramatic work, grew out of personal dislike—some out of scandal which had already begun to raise a reptant head. There was one Charles Brookfield for instance, who not only was active in adverse criticism, but also produced a burlesque on *Lady Windemeré's Fan* entitled *The Poet and the Puppets*, the poet being Wilde. It was the same Charles Brookfield who was largely responsible for collecting the evidence against Wilde, which brought about his downfall very soon after. In deed,

Brookfield and a few others entertained Queensberry at a banquet in celebration of the conviction of Wilde. It was "criticism" of the kind impeached by Coleridge in a never to be forgotten passage that should not be lost to the world. "As soon as the critic betrays that he knows more of his author than the author's publications could have told him; as soon as from this more intimate knowledge, elsewhere obtained, he avails himself of the slightest trait against the author; his censure immediately becomes personal injury, his sarcasms personal insults. He ceases to be a critic and takes on him the most contemptible character to which a rational creature can be degraded, that of a gossip, backbiter, *pasquillant;* but with this heavy aggravation, that he steals the unquiet, the deforming passions of the world into the museum; into the very place which, next to the chapel and oratory, should be our sanctuary and secure place of refuge; offers abominations on the altar of the Muses, and makes its sacred paling the very circle in which he conjures up the lying and profane spirit." And it is because of the existence in the Wilde case of so much of that which Coleridge thundered

against, that much of the so-called criticism of Wilde's dramatic work must be cast out. But the wonder of it all is that knowing what was behind, for he must have been cognizant of it, Wilde fought so well. If ever man died in the last ditch it was he. Greatly he dared and we love him for his daring. We find him throwing down the gage to the whole body of critics in a brilliant interview published in *The Sketch* of January 9th, 1895, three months before his downfall, when he knew perfectly well that the dark clouds were rolling up, and that poison tongues were fast wagging. He is talking to Gilbert Burgess. Hear him:

". . . For a man to be a dramatic critic is as foolish and inartistic as it would be for a man to be a critic of epics or a pastoral critic or a critic of lyrics. All modes of art are one, and the modes of art that employ words as its medium are quite indivisible. The result of the vulgar specialization of criticism is an elaborate scientific knowledge of the stage—almost as elaborate as that of stage carpenter, and quite on a par with that of the call boy—combined with an entire incapacity to realize that a play is a work of art or to receive any artistic impression at all. . . .

". . . The aim of the true critic is to try to chronicle his moods, not to try to correct the masterpieces of others. . . . Real critics? Ah, how perfectly charming they would be! I am always

waiting for their arrival. An inaudible school would be nice. . . . There are just two real critics in London . . . I think I had better not mention their names; it might make the others jealous . . . I do not write to please cliques. I write to please myself. . . . It is a burning shame that there should be one law for man and another law for women. I think there should be no law for anybody. . . ."

The whole interview is too long to quote and I have taken some of the salient passages. The complete thing may be read in the New York Daily Tribune of January 27th, 1895, under the heading *A Highly Artistic Interview.*

WILDE AS CRITIC

The critic of the critics was himself a critic. Whether he modified his work to suit his editors, or whether he was of the kindly sympathetic nature of a Michael Monahan or a William Marion Reedy is impossible to say, but certain it is that the Wilde of the criticisms is altogether a different being from the Wilde of the satirical epigram. You find very little of the Wilde perversities and idiosyncrasies, certainly none of the Hazlitt waspishness nor any of the Mencken bluntness. Now and then there is discovered occasional touches of tenderness as in his criticism of William Morris's *House*

of the Wolfings, (*Pall Mall Gazette*, March 2nd, 1889) and again in the review of W. B. Yeat's *Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry*, written for the magazine of which Wilde was editor, the *Woman's World*, February, 1889. There is a geniality almost equal to that of Charles Lamb or of Leigh Hunt somewhat evident. "As we read Mr. Morris's story (The Wolfings) with its fine alternations of verse and prose, its decorative and descriptive beauties, its wonderful handling of romantic and adventurous themes, we cannot but feel that we are as far removed from the ignoble fiction as we are from the ignoble facts of our own day. We breathe a purer air, and have dreams of a time when life had a kind of poetical quality of its own, and was simple, stately and complete." Certainly, Wilde as critic, sought to be just, was at pains to write frankly, vividly, accurately as possible. As critic he was thoroughly in earnest. The clever smartness we discover in him in his plays is absent in his critical work.

I think that the very real Wilde was revealed in a little essay, a writing that appeared in *The Speaker*, February 8th, 1890. It deals

with a translation of the works of Chuang Tzu as made by Mr. Herbert Giles, British Consul at Tamsui. With the Chinaman, Wilde was sympathetic. The idea pleased him that all modes of government are wrong, that they are unscientific because of their tendency to alter the natural environment of men; immoral because they interfered with the individual. In the essay there is a ring of Edmund Burke with his "the thing, government, the thing itself, is the abuse." It pleased Wilde immensely to find that the sage born in the fourth century before Christ denounced the uplifter, because trying to make others good was as foolish an occupation as "beating a drum in a forest to find a fugitive." Wilde found a man after his heart in the philosopher who declared against chattering about clever men, and lauding good men, and, what was worse, deifying powerful men. Then there is this by Wilde, talking about the accumulation of wealth, which, he says, Chuang Tzu denounces as eloquently as Mr. Hyndman. Wilde agrees with the philosopher, or at any rate, interprets him approvingly.

"The accumulation of wealth is to him the origin

of evil. It makes the strong violent and the weak dishonest. It creates the petty thief and puts him in a bamboo cage. It creates the big thief and sets him on a throne of white jade. It is the father of competition is the waste as well as the destruction of energy. The order of nature is rest, repetition and peace. Weariness and war are the results of an artificial society based upon capital; and the richer the society gets, the more thoroughly bankrupt it is, for it has neither sufficient rewards for the good nor sufficient punishment for the wicked. There is also this to be remembered—that the prizes of the world degrade a man as much as the world's punishments. The age is rotten with the worship of success. As for education, true wisdom can neither be learnt nor taught. It is a spiritual state to which he who lives in harmony with nature attains. Knowledge is shallow if we compare it with the extent of the unknown, and only the unknowable is of value. Society produces rogues, and education makes one rogue cleverer than others."

Compare that with the passage in *The Critic As Artist*, a speech that Wilde puts into the mouth of Gilbert:

Ernest. We exist, then, to do nothing?

Gilbert. It is to do nothing that the elect exist. Action is limited and relative. Unlimited and absolute is the vision of him who sits at ease and watches, who walks in loneliness and dreams. But we who are born at the close of this wonderful age, are at once too cultured and too critical, too intellectually subtle and too curious of exquisite pleasures, to accept any speculations about life in

exchange for life itself. To us the "citta divina" is colorless, and the "fruitio Dei" without meaning. Metaphysics do not satisfy our temperaments, and religious ecstasy is out of date. The world through which the Academic philosopher becomes "the spectator of all time and of all existence" is not really an ideal world, but simply a world of abstract ideas. When we enter it, we starve amidst the chill mathematics of thought. The courts of the city of God are not open to us now. Its gates are guarded by Ignorance, and to pass them we have to surrender all that in our nature is most divine. It is enough that our fathers believed. They have exhausted the faith-faculty of the species.

And in another place, later, in the same essay:

The security of society lies in custom and unconscious instinct, and the basis of the stability of society, as a healty organism, is the complete absence of any intelligence amongst its members. The great majority of people, being fully aware of this, rank themselves naturally on the side of that splendid system that elevates them to the dignity of machines, and rage so wildly against the intrusion of the intellectual faculty into any question that concerns life, that one is tempted to define man as a rational animal who always loses his temper when he is called upon to act in accordance with the dictates of reason.

Certainly, the philosophy of Chunag Tzu impressed Wilde greatly, influenced him more than has been generally thought, and, in fact, the philosophical basis of the greater part of the essay *The Critis As Artist* rests on that

of the Chinese mystic, with a decided substratum of Boehme. Boehme, certainly. The idea of self-surrender that Boehme promulgated, you find everywhere in Wilde, like a recurring golden thread in a tapestry. There is the Boehme "to-be" for which one will is necessary; for the "becoming," two. So Wilde:

> Yes, Ernest: the contemplative life, the life that has for its aim not *doing* but *being*, and not *being* merely, but *becoming*—that is what the critical spirit can give us.

The mystery of it is that Wilde should have so intermixed in his own life and philosophy the self-surrender of Boehme with the self-assertion of Nietzsche. That he did so is not to be denied—to attempt to explain how it so came to be is impossible. But then, who can explain another? Who can understand or explain himself? The truth is that Wilde, like every one else, was a bundle of vain strivings, as Thoreau put it. Wilde, like everyone else, gathered together his things to make a bridge to the moon and wound up by making something like a woodshed of the material. So do we all. Man's reach certainly does exceed his grasp. Browning said much there in a half dozen words.

Of course, there are *Sententiae*, little impatiences, sympathetic critic though he was. "Most modern novels are more remarkable for their crime than for their culture." "Though the Psalm of Life be shouted from Maine to California, that would not make it good poetry." "Pathology is rapidly becoming the basis of sensational literature, and in art, as in politics, there is a great future for monsters." "Such novels as—are possibly more easy to write than to read." "There seems to be some curious connection between piety and poor rhymes." "It is always a pleasure to come across an American poet who is not national, and who tries to give expression to the literature that he loves rather than to the land he lives in. The Muses care so little for geography!"—but as critic of literature Wilde was eminently fair and just, pointing out the good in writers so vastly apart as Walt Whitman, Pater, Yeats, Blunt, Matthew Arnold; dropping his own prejudices, getting inside the skins of those whose work he found to be worthy.

WILDE AS ESSAYIST

Perhaps Wilde was to the fashionable of London much as the robust Henry Fielding was

to the literary world when Samuel Richardson wrote *Clarissa Harlowe.* He had to shock the polite world out of its terrible complacency. For there were such proper waxen figures as Samuel Smiles and Martin Farquahar Tupper cooing, and there were many who modeled their conduct upon the example of Sir Charles Grandison—milk and water men, sanctified prigs, pious and irreproachable gentlemen in whose mouths butter would not melt. To be respectable was the one virtue, and tender sensibilities were shocked when Shaw wore a woolen shirt and when Morris solemnly sat on his silk hat. Yet, there must have been a secret delight in scandal. Turning over the newspapers of the day we find prominence given to items with salacious base. For instance, the crimes of Jack the Ripper, the Charles Dilke divorce case, the Parmell-O'Shea tangle, Stead's Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon. The fascination of murder held them as now. Quiet men and women found something of vast interest in reading reports of acts of violence, in living in imagination unrestrained lives. But, the record of crime had been left to inept hands. To be sure in novels, action hinged

upon crime, but in novels criminals were always black, lost souls who bore the brand of Cain on their brows, had no single redeeming trait and went their way for a time certain of being laid by the heels. It was, then, a tremendous and daring conception of Oscar Wilde to take a wholesale murderer as the subject of an essay, but he did so and produced a most interesting piece of work conceived in graceful vein in his *Pen, Pencil and Poison*—the story of Thomas Griffiths Wainewright. The subject of the essay has been confused with another murderer, Henry Wainwright, also an educated man with literary tastes, familiar with the actors and poets of his day, but the last named murderer was but a clumsy fellow compared with Wilde's hero.

The late Max Nordau in his book *Degeneration* has found, stupidly enough, evidence of a love for "immorality" in Wilde because of the essay, tearing from the context certain passages and adducing them as proof of Wilde's diabolism. One paragraph is truly amusing in its ingenuousness. I quote from page 320:

"Oscar Wilde apparently admires immorality, sin and crime. In a very affectionate biographical treatise on Thomas Griffith Wainewright, designer,

painter, and author, and the murderer of several people, he says: 'He was a forger of no mean or ordinary capabilities, and as a subtle and secret poisoner almost without a rival in this or any age.' 'This remarkable man, so powerful with pen and pencil, and poison.' 'He sought to find expression by pen or poison.' 'When a friend reproached him with the murder of Helen Abercrombie, he shrugged his shoulders and said: 'Yes; it was a dreadful thing to do, but she had very thick ankles.' 'His crimes seem to have had an important effect upon his art. They gave a strong personality to his style, a quality that his early work certainly lacked.' 'There is no sin except stupidity.' 'An idea that is not dangerous is unworthy of being called an idea at all.'

"He cultivates incidently a slight mysticism in colours. 'He,' Wainewright, 'had that curious love of green which in individuals is always the sign of subtle, artistic temperament, and in nations is said to denote a laxity, if not a decadence, of morals.' "

That, of course, is sheer stupidity. We do not denounce Charles Dickens because he told the story of Bill Sikes, of the Artful Dodger, of Fagin, nor do we shudder at the name of Conrad because he ended *Victory* as he did. Doubtless, Max Nordau, on similar grounds to those on which he condemned Wilde and Ibsen and Nietzsche as degenerates, might have found cause to place the Bible on his index expurgatoris. The fact is that Oscar Wilde wrote

a fine essay on the murderer and not perhaps so much because he was a murderer, as that he was one of those extraordinary men who failed to become what he bade to be, and was the friend and companion of such men as Charles Lamb, Dickens, Macready and Hablot Browne. Perhaps Wilde had in mind his own case, certainly there are prophetic passages and there is for example a parallel existing between the incident told by Gide when he met Wilde in connection with Wainewright.

While he was in gaol, Dickens, Macready, and Hablot Browne came across him by chance. They had been going over the prisons of London, searching for artistic effects, and in Newgate they suddenly caught sight of Wainewright. He met them with a defiant stare, Forster tells us, but Macready was "horrified to recognize a man familiarly known to him in former years, and at whose table he had dined."

Look at the essay on Wainewright as the picture of a man who tortures himself, a man of taste and sensibility at whose heart the worm of misery gnawed constantly, a man sickened with secret maladies, a man with brain on fire who moved among his fellows with a smiling face, fearing at every moment the knocking at the gate which would mean his

doom—read the essay with all that in mind and you will be rightly attuned for the pleasure. No show mannikin, no machine of creaking wood has Wilde in his Wainewright, but a living thing, a frightened thing, a tormented thing, a vice ridden thing. You feel the daily fear that must have been in the murderer's heart though Wilde does not play on the vulgar emotions, displaying remorse crudely as Dickens does in his tale of the murderer Jonas Chuzzlewit. But, in some mysterious manner, Wilde makes his reader sense a melancholy, just as Beethoven makes us sense a melancholy in that immortal passage of his seventh symphony when the stringed instruments sob in the bass.

Here is Wilde's picture of the man in the midst of the things that he loved:

> And so, in his own library, as he describes it, we find the delicate fictile vase of the Greek, with its exquisitely painted figures and the faint ΚΑΛΟΕ finely traced upon its side, and behind it hangs an engraving of the "Delphic Sibyl" of Michael Angelo, or of the "Pastoral" of Giorgione. Here is a bit of Florentine majolica, and here a rude lamp from some old Roman tomb. On the table lies a book of Hours "cased in a cover of solid silver gilt, wrought with quaint devices and studded with small brilliants and rubies," and close by it "squats a

little ugly monster, a Lar, perhaps, dug up in the sunny fields of corn-bearing Sicily." Some dark antique bronzes contrast "with the pale gleam of two noble *Christi Crucifixi,* one carved in ivory, the other molded in wax." He has his trays of Tassie's gems, his tiny Louis-Quatorze *bonbonniere* with a miniature by Petitot, his highly prized "brown-biscuit teapots, filagree-worked," his citron morocco letter-case and his "pomona-green" chair.

One can fancy him lying there in the midst of his books and casts and engravings, a true virtuoso, a subtle connoisseur, turning over his fine collection of Marc Antonios, and his Turner's "Liber Studiorum," of which he was a warm admirer, or examining with a magnifier some of his antique gems and cameos, "the head of Alexander on an onyx of two strata," or "that superb *altissimo relievo* on cornelian, Jupiter Ægiochus."

And again, in a charming passage:

Like Disraeli, he determined to startle the town as a dandy, and his beautiful rings, his antique cameo breast-pin, and his pale lemon-colored kid gloves, were well known, and indeed were regarded by Hazlitt as being the signs of a new manner in literature: while his rich curly hair, fine eyes, and exquisite white hands gave him the dangerous and delightful distinction of being different from others. There was something in him of Balzac's Lucien de Rubempre. At times he reminds us of Julien Sorel. De Quincey saw him once. It was at a dinner at Charles Lamb's. "Amongst the company, all literary men, sat a murderer," he tells us, and he goes on to describe how on that had he had been ill, and had hated the face of man and woman,

and yet found himself looking with intellectual interest across the table at the young writer beneath whose affectations of manner there seemed to him to lie so much unaffected sensibility, and speculates on "what sudden growth of another interest," would have changed his mood, had he known of what terrible sin the guest to whom Lamb paid so much attention was even then guilty.

In that last sentence, the reference to the "terrible sin" of which he knew himself to be guilty, I cannot but see a subtle reference to himself. Indeed, Wilde seems to be constantly projecting himself, giving hints as it were, of what might be, just as a child guilty of some misdemeanor, will make veiled references to its plight yet, at the same time, do all that is possible to avoid discovery. Here is a passage in which, writing of Wainewright, he surely describes himself:

His delicately strung organization however indifferent it might have been to inflicting pain on others, was itself most keenly sensitive to pain. He shrank from suffering as a thing that mars and maims human life.

Again:

Like Baudelaire, he was extremely fond of cats, and with Gautier, he was fascinated by that "sweet marble monster" of both sexes that we can still see at Florence and in the Louvre.

And this too, which is Wilde to a T:

Modern journalism may be said to owe almost as much to him as to any man of the early part of this century. He was the pioneer of Asiatic prose, and delighted in pictorial epithets and pompous exaggerations. To have a style so gorgeous that it conceals the subject is one of the highest achievements of an important and much admired school of Fleet Street leader-writers, and this school *Janus Weathercock* may be said to have invented. He also saw that it was quite easy by continued reiteration to make the public interested in his own personality, and in his purely journalistic articles this extraordinary young man tells the world what he had for dinner, where he gets his clothes, what wines he likes, and in what state of health he is, just as if he were writing weekly notes for some popular newspaper of our own time. This being the least valuable side of his work, is the one that has had the most obvious influence. A publicist, now-a-days, is a man who bores the community with the details of the illegalities of his private life.

Perhaps too there is an apologia in another passage:

This strange and fascinating figure that for a few years dazzled literary London, and made so brilliant a *debut* in life and letters, is undoubtedly a most interesting study. Mr. W. Carew Hazlitt, his latest biographer, to whom I am indebted for many of the facts contained in this memoir, and whose little book is, indeed, quite invaluable in its way, is of opinion that his love of art and nature was a mere pretense and assumption, and others have denied to him all literary power. This seems

to me a shallow, or at least a mistaken, view. The fact of a man being a poisoner is nothing against his prose. The domestic virtues are not the true basis of art, though they may serve as an excellent advertisement for second-rate artists.

But it is neither safe nor wise to theorize too much, though, to be sure, more than one of us feel strongly inclined to say of Wilde as he said of Wainewright:

> The moral instinct can be brought to such a pitch of perfection that it will make its appearance wherever it is not required. Nobody with the true historical sense ever dreams of blaming Nero, or scolding Tiberius or censuring Cæsar Borgia. These personages have become like the puppets of a play. They may fill us with terror, or horror, or wonder, but they do not harm us. They are not in immediate relation to us. We have nothing to fear from them. They have passed into the sphere of art and science, and neither art nor science knows anything of moral approval or disapproval.

Wilde's two essays, *The Decay of Lying* and *The Critic as Artist* I have referred to several times in the course of this essay, and also in another booklet, *The Tragic Story of Oscar Wilde.* In much, both essays are complementary to his Art and Decoration: the themes wind in and out like the theme in a fugue. There are inconsistencies, there is sometimes flippancy and there is much of utmost exquisite

polish. But always—style—style that becomes sometimes pavonic display. Witness, from the *Decay of the Art of Lying*:

> The solid stolid British intellect lies in the desert sands like the Sphinx in Flaubert's marvelous tale, and fantasy *La Chimere,* dances around it, and calls to it with her false, flute-toned voice. It may not hear her now, but surely some day, when we are all bored to death with the common-place character of modern fiction, it will hearken to her and try to borrow her wings.
>
> And when that day dawns, or sunset reddens how joyous we shall all be! Facts will be regarded as discreditable, Truth will be found mourning over her fetters, and Romance, with her temper of wonder, will return to the land. The very aspect of the world will change to our startled eyes. Out of the sea will rise Behemoth and Leviathan, and sail round the high-pooped galleys, as they do on the delightful maps of those ages when books on geography were actually readable. Dragons will wander about the waste places, and the phœnix will soar from her nest of fire into the air. We shall lay our hands upon the basilisk, and see the jewel in the toad's head. Champing his gilded oats, the Hippogriff will stand in our stalls, and over our heads will float the Blue Bird singing of beautiful and impossible things, of things that are lovely and that never happened, of things that are not and that should be. But before this comes to pass we must cultivate the lost art of Lying.

Of course, it must be admitted that there is truth in those who complain that Wilde ad-

vocated no system of morality which could console, raise or satisfy men. But to do that was not Wilde's mission. He was no moralist—made, indeed, his art his religion and deals with, as Wordsworth said:

> the very world, which is the world
> Of all of us, the place where in the end
> We find our happiness, or not at all.
> (Prelude xl, 142.)

but his world, like the world of the Pre-Raphaelites, was confessedly a falsehood, a world other than that which we see. That art, or poetry, could go on to take in things other than of fairy land, could deal with such things as sky-scrapers, fire vomiting factories, machinery, as it does in the hands of Carl Sandburg, was unthinkable to Wilde as it would have been unthinkable to Ruskin. But then, Wilde found things to love which would have been altogether strange to his men of Greece—mountain mists, brown fogs, clefts in rocks. So, pondering, we get into deep water. The idea of truth as conceived by the artist and the idea as conceived by the religious mind . . . . religion born of faith and art born of perception . . . . religion growing out of a soil of disillusion, art growing out of joy of life. . . .

AS POET.

Oscar Wilde did not have a jealous care of the art poetic. There was too much of that "style" for real ecstasy; that style, too, was too often encumbered with preciosities, overhung with ornamentation. Then, too, he was constantly trying new forms, experimenting, seeking a satisfactory model. Yet it would be wrong to assert that his poetry lacks verbal charm, and the average man who has no great patience with poetry, who would never sit down to read an *In Memoriam* or an *Ode to a Grecian Urn*, the kind of a man who loses himself among poetic phrases, finds that Wilde evokes a picture by words full of color. Take this, for instance:

SYMPHONY IN YELLOW

An omnibus across the bridge
  Crawls like a yellow butterfly,
  And, here and there, a passer-by
Shows like a little restless midge.

Big barges full of yellow hay
  Are moved against the shadowy wharf,
  And, like a yellow silken scarf,
The thick fog hangs along the quay.

The yellow leaves begin to fade
  And flutter from the Temple elms,
  And at my feet the pale green Thames
Lies like a rod of rippled jade.

a slight enough thing, but full of interest and spirit. Your man who loses him self in verse based on legendary lore or mysticism, understands and enjoys that. It means something to him. For the same reason Wilde's *Ballad of Reading Gaol* interests and excites, almost like an adventure story, combining simplicity and beauty in a way that is altogether satisfying. Mark how a concrete image is called up by a short descriptive passage.

I walked, with other souls in pain,
  Within another ring,
And was wondering if the man had done
  A great or little thing,
When a voice behind me whispered low,
  "That fellow's got to swing."

And mark the dramatic appeal of this:

A prison wall was round us both,
  Two outcast men we were:
The world had thrust us from its heart,
  And God from out His care:
And the iron gin that waits for Sin
  Had caught us in its snare.

And twice a day he smoked his pipe,
  And drank his quart of beer:
His soul was resolute, and held
  No hiding-place for fear;
He often said that he was glad
  The hangman's hands were near.

But why he said so strange a thing
No warder dared to ask:
For he to whom a watcher's doom
Is given as his task,
Must set a lock upon his lips,
And make his face a mask.

He gets very close there to the heart of the common man, as close as James Stephens indeed, with his *What Tomas an Buile Said in a Pub.*

The truth of the matter is that under pain, the artificial Wilde vanished and his poetry became something other than pretence and artifice. I say that, because Douglas has told us that up to the time of his imprisonment, Wilde had "held that style was everything, and feeling nothing; that poetry should be removed as well from material actuality as from the actuality of the spirit, and that no great poet had ever in his greatest moments been other than sincere." (Page 209, Oscar Wilde and Myself.) And of *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, Douglas writes, "(in it) we have a sustained poem of sublimated actuality and of a breadth and sweep and poignancy such as had never before been attained in this line. The emotional appeal is . . . . quite legitimate and . . . . the

established tradition as to what is fitting and comely in a poem of this nature is not outraged or transgressed"

Another great poem grew out of his prison life. I refer to the long letter, made into a book by Mr. Ross and entitled *De Profundis*, for a poem, a prose poem, it is. It would be better to mention in this place that *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* was not composed until Wilde had left prison. *De Profundis*, however, was written within stone walls. In another place quotation has been made of Blunt's Diaries in which Ross is quoted as having said that it is impossible to tell how much of *De Profundis* is sincere repentance, and how much the result of self pity. Be that as it may, it is very certain that the spirit of the man was bitter in his solitude, that his egoism fell away from him at times. But it is absurd to expect that punishment and imprisonment and disgrace could change the man himself. If he had that feminine soul, he had it. It was part of him, and he could not get away from it, prison or no prison. But he could know in his own heart that he was not as he should have liked to be, that his life's ideal was other than his

life's path. In other words, he realized, as we all realize, that while his eyes were fixed on the stars, his feet were firmly planted in the mud, and for that fact he was very sorry indeed. Not only sorry, but rebellious that things were as they were, and, as Wilde said, the mood of rebellion closes up the channels of the soul, and shuts out the air of heaven. The mood rebellious and the mood penitential cannot sit side by side in the same heart. Penitence presupposes submission and gratitude for gifts bestowed, and Wilde felt no gratitude to the fates that had at his birth, dropped into his veins the one drop of black blood which colored his life. Destiny is omnipotent, and destiny had given Wilde the feminine soul. Doubtless, had Wilde been what he wished to be, in his better moments, he would have sat with august divinities. But neither Wilde, nor you, nor I, have it in our powers to command the winds that would waft us to the Islands of the Blest.

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